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SUBJECT: BI-NATIONAL BORDER DEVELOPMENT PLAN ADVANCES

REF: QUITO 00977

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ecuadorian and Colombian government officials will meet in Quito on April 24-25 to discuss the creation of an integrated development zone along their common border. The idea of the plan, agreed to at December 7, 2005 bilateral ministerial meetings in Quito, seeks to identify and develop joint programs and projects to increase public services in the area of health, education, water, and transportation, while encouraging licit economic growth and better environmental management. We are hopeful the plan could help broaden and smooth relations between the two neighbors. End Summary.

December 7 Ministerial Produces Results

¶2. (U) Ecuador and Colombia on April 24-25 will hold vice-ministerial talks in Quito to finalize plans for an integrated development zone (IDZ) along their common border. The plan, first discussed in 2002, had been indefinitely delayed by contentious bilateral relations over alleged airspace violations by the GOC and the GOE demand that aerial spraying of coca crops be suspended within 10 km of the shared border. A December 7, 2005, joint declaration by FMs Carrion and Barco reinitiated bilateral dialogue mechanisms.

IDZ Closer to Reality

¶3. (U) Ecuadorian and Colombian government representatives met on January 26 in Tulcan, Carchi province, to discuss the previously stalled IDZ and to outline parameters for their engagement. The bi-national committee agreed that the IDZ should promote greater social and economic development along the troubled border region. Under the proposed social program, the IDZ would promote investment in health, education, water, and transportation. On the economic front, representatives agreed that the IDZ should promote licit economic activity and growth in the region.

¶4. (U) The proposed IDZ spans the entire 400-mile border zone, and aims to improve the lives of over 2 million Ecuadorians and Colombians living in the area. The proposal is divided into three distinct regions-)Pacific, Andean, and Amazon, and includes 21 Ecuadorian and 31 Colombian municipalities. The proposed IDZ also aims to enhance environmental and resource management efforts in the region, with provisions for the creation of cross-border disaster planning mechanisms.

MFA Optimistic About Plan

¶5. (SBU) MFA Director General for Border Development Amb. Claudio Cevallos told PolOff that the GOE was optimistic about the plan, believing it to be a positive step towards addressing dire border conditions. Project proposals were selected with considerable input from local residents and public officials, he said, adding that grass-root acceptance and engagement is crucial for the IDZ,s success. The IDZ, according to Cevallos, would also promote greater communication and coordination between relevant local, provincial, and federal government entities, and would be coordinated through the GOE,s Northern Border Development Unit (UDENOR). He said concerns about UDENOR,s ability to effectively administer the program would hopefully be resolved soon.

International Donors Key

¶6. (SBU) Cevallos said that Ecuador following the April 24-25 meeting would seek international donor support for the proposed IDZ. He acknowledge extensive USAID support for development projects in the northern border region, but added that he hoped the U.S. would provide additional technical and financial assistance for the IDZ.

¶7. (SBU) UNDP Officer Michael Brown said that the UN had provided the MFA technical assistance in preparation for their bi-national development meetings with Colombia, and that he continues to serve as an advisor. Brown remains encouraged by progress made, suggesting that the GOE might be more prepared for the April 24-25 meeting than their Colombian counterparts. He again assured us that the preliminary UN glyphosate report scheduled to be released to the GOE the week of April 24 would urge bi-national coordination on health and development issues in the border region.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) We are encouraged by the progress made on the IDZ, and continue to push for greater cooperation and collaboration between the Ecuadorian and Colombian governments on cross-border development and security issues. We are hopeful that that the preliminary UN glyphosate report, scheduled to be released the week of April 24, will promote broader discussions on greater investment in these areas, rather than the narrow, politicized specific focus on glyphosate. VFM Ribadeneira recently confided to visiting WHA/AND Director French that renewed aerial spraying by the GOC would "drop a bomb" on the bilateral development agenda (RefTel). We will encourage the GOE to focus instead on the potential of a well-planned and executed integrated development zone.

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